

UK National Security Strategy: Progress, Setbacks and Priorities

Summary of a roundtable jointly hosted by Rethinking Security, the British International Studies Association Security Policy and Practice Group, and the Centre for Defence Studies at King's College London on 18 May 2026

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Executive Summary

The 2025 UK National Security Strategy (NSS2025) describes a world of “radical uncertainty,” marked by intensifying great-power competition, geopolitical volatility, and a greater risk of both direct and indirect confrontation. Its answer is to connect security at home with strength abroad: making the UK harder to target, renewing alliances and partnerships, and building more sovereign and asymmetric capabilities so that Britain is less exposed to coercion. The strategy therefore grounds national security in defence policy, promises the country a “defence dividend”, and advances a wider resilience agenda spanning infrastructure, supply chains, technology, energy, food, finance, and public trust.

The year since the publication of NSS2025 has reaffirmed the need for an integrated approach across this range of areas, validated the diagnosis of ‘radical uncertainty’, and delivered the geostrategic shocks anticipated in the strategy – underlining the need for dynamic adaptation in response. In this context, in May 2026, Rethinking Security, the Centre for Defence Studies at King’s College London and the BISA Working Group on Security Policy and Practice convened senior experts to consider progress, setbacks and priorities for UK national security. Key issues, insights and recommendations are captured in this document.¹

The most consequential understanding shaping the discussion was the recognition that US volatility and hostility has intensified. UK national security thinkers should continue to take this shift seriously, and bring contingency plans more rapidly into place. The UK should **move more decisively to strengthen UK-EU defence relations**, and more quickly to **make the UK defence sector fit for purpose**.

To do this, the Government needs to **focus less on the level of defence spending, and more on getting to the outputs needed** for effective deterrence and self-defence. To be less dependent on others, and better able to respond to plausible military threats, procurement reform and innovation needs to be accelerated. To deliver on this, the MoD must become less wasteful, better at negotiating value with research, development and manufacturing firms, and more accountable. It should also try to move away from long-lead, high-cost production of legacy platforms towards a more innovative defence sector that can, if needed, protect the country from drone and hybrid warfare at an affordable cost. While some dependencies appear inevitable, working to ensure the UK has some technological USPs to leverage towards other partners is strategically vital.

While this overhaul of defensive capabilities is urgent, **the UK also requires a more holistic threat assessment and a better balanced NSS in response**. Four critical areas of systemic risk must now come more clearly into focus:

- **Oligarchic authoritarianism** Division and extremism in the UK and Europe is being actively promoted – not only by Russia, but also by the US. This is undermining social cohesion and resilience, and the UK’s ability to tackle the long-term challenges it faces. It is a growing social, cultural and political threat, underpinned by economic inequality. It is therefore different in nature from the conventional, territorial conflict that NSS2025 is preparing the country to face. In response, the UK urgently needs to adapt its approach to strengthen its society and democracy, and address polarisation.
- **Climate and ecosystem collapse** The Government should own its own risk assessments regarding threats to critical ecosystems and UK food security, reaffirm net zero as the only rational response, tackle climate disinformation, recommit to higher levels of climate and green transition spending, and push for more decisive international cooperation to tackle climate change and ecosystem collapse.

¹ As the roundtable was held under the Chatham House rule, the points in this document are not attributed; nor do they represent the views of BISA, King’s College London, Rethinking Security or all of the participants.

- **Conflict and instability** Amid record levels of conflict, the UK should be increasing investment in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. These cannot be managed solely by the military, and cuts to diplomatic expertise and partner support are putting the UK's leading conflict expertise at risk of collapse. Regions such as the Western Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa require more proactive peace and stabilisation engagement, with use of leverage, diplomatic creativity and development investment to help broker new settlements and tackle underlying issues.
- **Health security** COVID-19 underlined the potential for future biological threats to undermine public safety, well-being, food security and prosperity. In response the UK needs to be equipped to prevent, detect, and respond to biological threats and work to maintain the protection provided by global health institutions.

Working on such systemic problems requires following through on UK efforts under NSS2025 to **strengthen relations and cooperation, in particular with G20 countries, where opportunities exist to tackle common concerns**. Cooperation to make progress on shared challenges needs to be accelerated – not only with like-minded players such as the EU, Japan and South Korea, but also where interests align with powerful regional/global actors such as Indonesia, Brazil, India and key Gulf States. To strive for collective action on climate, reforestation and other global priorities – and hedge against coercive behaviours – the Government should clarify priorities, invest in diplomatic training, presence and a compelling UK offer, and restore the UK's reputation as a team player that consistently upholds and works to expand respect for international law.

Public engagement needs to be improved, so that the public is not prompted to consider national security priorities only when exposed to price shocks and cyber attacks; the public must understand and debate the various threats, opportunities, response options and trade-offs more routinely, and with access to both reliable information and a broad spectrum of opinion. The diverse and polarised public views documented in recent research illustrate that the Government needs to work hard to regain public trust on national security. The promised 'national conversation' on defence and security, which is yet to materialise, is thus vital for social cohesion and national unity around smart security policy options.

However, it will be hard to succeed without working on **epistemic security**. For example, in a post-truth context in which algorithms, social media and unregulated media channels supply much of Britain's news, disinformation regarding climate, fossil fuels and the green transition is muddying public consensus around net zero as the only rational antidote to climate change, ecosystem collapse and severe food insecurity.

Reversing this 'epistemic insecurity' can only be achieved through **broader, better public debate on national security policy**. This begins with candour and clarity from Government on threats and required responses; and whatever their perspective, politicians, officials, think tanks, scholars, journalists, civil society and practitioner organisations all have important roles in this process. Likewise, the Government should take a pro-active stance to prevent unregulated media, social media, tech companies and disinformation from fomenting division, undermining democracy and people's sense of security, while at the same time upholding fundamental freedoms.

Overall, therefore, participants favoured a more holistic UK national security approach that: (1) pursues deterrence more efficiently and accountably; (2) approaches systemic risks more circumspectly and responsibly; and (3) informs, engages and consults the public more within a more democratic, but better regulated and less polarised information environment. By combining these three elements, the UK can maximise its resilience in today's uncertain world.

Introduction

On 18 May 2026, Rethinking Security, the Centre for Defence Studies at King's College London and the BISA Working Group on Security Policy and Practice co-hosted the roundtable 'UK National Security Strategy: progress, setbacks and priorities' for a group of strategic decision-makers, experienced scholars and practitioners.

The 2025 UK National Security Strategy (NSS2025) provided the immediate backdrop. It describes a world of 'radical uncertainty,' marked by intensifying great-power competition, geopolitical volatility, and a greater risk of both direct and indirect confrontation. Its answer is to connect security at home with strength abroad: making the UK harder to target, renewing alliances and partnerships, and building more sovereign and asymmetric capabilities so that Britain is less exposed to coercion. The strategy therefore grounds national security in defence policy, promises the country a 'defence dividend', and advances a wider resilience agenda spanning infrastructure, supply chains, technology, energy, food, finance, and public trust.

A year on from the publication of NSS2025, the event took stock of the document, and subsequent efforts to deliver on its vision, within a fast-evolving international environment. This outcome document summarises key issues and the insights and recommendations discussed in four areas: the evolving strategic picture; defence investments, sovereign capabilities and supply chains; relationships and alliances; and resilience to future threats.

In line with the Chatham House Rule, the points covered are not attributed to individuals; nor do they necessarily reflect the views of the co-hosting organisations or all of the participants.

Session 1: The evolving strategic picture

Background analysis

NSS2025 depicted an era of 'radical uncertainty,' marked by great power competition, authoritarian aggression, extremist ideologies and technological change. In response, it called for a hardening and sharpening of the UK's approach, focused on security at home, strength abroad, and increased sovereign and asymmetric capabilities. Since then, significant developments have included the following:

Evolving US posture and behaviour: A succession of erratic US actions has significantly added to global volatility over the past year. The 2025 US National Security Strategy (USNSS) underlined increasing US focus on its own national interest, scepticism towards multilateral institutions, and pressure on partners to increase their military capacities and contributions. There is a gap between USNSS language and recent US conduct. The USNSS emphasises peace, restraint, non-intervention, and freedom of navigation, yet the US-Israel-Iran war has intensified regional instability and disrupted shipping via the Strait of Hormuz, with wider effects on energy prices, insurance costs, and supply chains.

The USNSS also prioritises the Western Hemisphere while warning that Europe faces 'civilisational erasure' and affirms that the US will cultivate 'resistance to Europe's current trajectory.' Echoing this aspect of the US agenda, right-leaning sections of the UK electorate, and potentially its next government, view migration into the UK as the primary security priority.²

² See T Martin, 'Public Opinion & National Security in the UK: A People-Centred Approach' (Open University, April 2026) and related discussion under Session 4 below.

Despite concern over the evolving US posture, European allies' dependence on the US prescribes caution about loosening Euro-Atlantic ties. The UK, in particular, remains deeply dependent on the US for intelligence, nuclear, and high-end conventional defence capabilities. Yet the political terms of that dependence are changing. In the Chagos/Diego Garcia case, the UK has sought to resolve the sovereignty dispute with Mauritius, but the settlement has been shaped by the strategic imperative of preserving US and UK access to Diego Garcia.

More broadly, US pressure over Greenland, reduced support for Ukraine, diplomacy more accommodating of Russian claims to Ukrainian territory, and the use of force against Iran and Venezuela all underline the volatility of the UK's security patron. US commitments to NATO and European security today inevitably appear conditional, transactional, and unpredictable.

Now into its fifth year, frontlines in the **Russia-Ukraine war** are barely moving, but Ukraine may be consolidating its position:³ the transition into longer-range drone warfare has enabled Ukraine to strike Russia's oil and energy infrastructure, adding to pressure on Russia. It also means that Ukraine has leveraged its anti-drone capabilities towards allies in the context of the Iran war, whilst political change in Hungary has unlocked new levels of European financial support for Ukraine. Nonetheless, even under pressure, Russia retains energy assets, alliances (most importantly with China), influence (notably among NATO members Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania), hybrid capabilities and nuclear muscle. Thus, Russia remains a determined, unpredictable, and dangerous actor in the region.

European armament and UK rapprochement: in 2025, Europe and Canada responded to these developments by moving rapidly towards a more self-sufficient, autonomous defence posture. With the NATO defence spending target rising from 2% to 3.5%, European NATO members and Canada raised their defence spending by 20% in 2025.⁴ EU leaders are also working on buying European and facilitating joint procurement, expanding the manufacturing base for arms production,⁵ and developing a formal operational plan for mutual defence.⁶ Following the 2025 pivot towards the Euro-Atlantic, the UK's posture remains 'NATO-first', but the Prime Minister has pushed for closer European defence ties and integration,⁷ and senior figures are questioning UK reliance on the US more openly than ever.⁸

Against the backdrop of military, economic and technological competition between global and regional actors, wider **trends in conflict and stability** remain depressing. Amid a 'surge in violence not seen since the post-World War II era', 2024 marked a 'grim new record: the highest number of state-based armed conflicts in over seven decades'.⁹ These alarming levels of conflict and violence persisted in 2025,¹⁰ and appear to be intensifying in 2026. The Iran war sucked away resources and bandwidth from Israel-Palestine while triggering heightened instability in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. Forgotten conflicts and high levels of violence persist unresolved in many other settings across Africa (not least in DRC and Sudan), Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia. Trade, finance and supply

³ O Harmash, 'Zelenskiy says frontline situation best for Ukraine in the last 10 months', *Reuters*, 3 Apr 2026. K Odarcheko, 'Ukraine's military success is exposing the myth of inevitable Russian victory', *Atlantic Council*, 1 Apr 2026. 'Is the tide turning for Ukraine in war with Russia? – The Latest', *Today in Focus* (podcast), *The Guardian*, 23 Apr 2026.

⁴ 'NATO sees sharp increase in Europe and Canada's defence spending', *Reuters*, 26 Mar 2026.

⁵ European Commission, 'Acting on defence to protect Europeans', https://commission.europa.eu/topics/defence/future-european-defence_en, accessed 29 Apr 2026.

⁶ 'EU leaders to prepare blueprint for mutual assistance pact, amid NATO doubts', *Reuters*, 24 April 2026.

⁷ 'UK's Starmer calls for stronger 'hard power' and European defence ties', *Reuters*, 13 Feb 2026; 'Starmer stresses urgency of closer European defence ties', *The Guardian*, 14 Feb 2026.

⁸ 'Britain's military dependence on US 'no longer tenable', says former Nato chief', *The Guardian*, 22 April 2026.

⁹ PRIO, 'New data shows conflict at historic high as U.S. signals retreat from world stage', 9 Jun 2025.

¹⁰ According to ACLED, 'Conflict remained at a steady level over the past 12 months. ACLED records 204,605 conflict events from 1 December 2024 to 28 November 2025, compared to 208,219 events 12 months prior. These violent events resulted — conservatively — in over 240,000 deaths.' 'Conflict Index', *ACLED*, retrieved 29 April 2026.

chains are increasingly disrupted by war and geopolitics, with the 2026 energy price and supply shocks unleashing a new wave of inflation, debt stress and low growth across an already unstable world.

Poverty, humanitarian need and human rights: Amid wars, heavy cuts to peace and humanitarian operations, and a record number of deadly attacks on aid workers, humanitarian need is near record levels, outpacing the system's capacity to respond: the UN estimates that 239 million people need urgent humanitarian assistance worldwide, and over 117 million people remain forcibly displaced.¹¹ Underpinning the more visible trends in violence, the world is experiencing a profound crisis in democracy and human rights. According to V-Dem, 'The world has never before seen as many countries autocratizing at the same time as during the last few years'. As a result, 'Democracy is back to 1978 levels for the average global citizen'.¹²

Climate, environment and food security: The past three years, 2023-2025, are the three warmest years on record, with temperatures 1.48 degrees above the pre-Industrial era.¹³ In early 2026 the UK Government reported that 'Global ecosystem degradation and collapse threaten UK national security and prosperity... Every critical ecosystem is on a pathway to collapse.... Without significant increases in UK food system and supply chain resilience, it is unlikely the UK would be able to maintain food security'.¹⁴ This is not only an overseas risk. The UK is already facing more frequent and severe weather-related hazards, including flooding, storms, heatwaves and wildfires, with growing consequences for homes, infrastructure, public health, agriculture and the natural environment. The Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation adds a further systemic risk: while the timing and likelihood of severe weakening or collapse remain uncertain, a weaker AMOC could alter UK and European weather patterns, rainfall, sea levels and agricultural conditions. In combination, these risks point to a more volatile operating environment for the UK, in which domestic resilience, food security, emergency planning and supply-chain security are central to national security.

In this context, Session 1 explored the questions:

- Q1. How have key threats, opportunities and relationships evolved in the past year?
- Q2. In what ways do they affirm or alter the assumptions and directions adopted in NSS2025?
- Q3. What adjustments does this suggest may be needed?

Key ideas discussed

- One year on, little has evolved on some files, such as China, MENA, migration, terrorism and climate change. The biggest change has been that trends that were visible in the US have become more manifest. While NSS2025 was coy on these trends, with a view to maintaining the best relationship possible with the Trump administration, the UK now needs to be more honest about the situation and show greater urgency in responding. While the US relationship runs deep and can survive superficial dramas, the signs that US hostility to Europe and the UK is fast taking hold, and may already run broad and deep, must be taken much more seriously by UK national security thinkers, with contingency plans being brought more rapidly into place.
- Some participants argued, nonetheless, that the analysis of radical uncertainty and the recommendations made by NSS2025 in response remain valid, and thus the core challenge is the pace of implementation – for example publishing and implementing a credible Defence

¹¹ UN, 'Crisis and Emergency Response', <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/crisis-and-emergency-response>, accessed 29 Apr 2026.

¹² V-Dem Institute, 'Democracy Report 2026: Unraveling The Democratic Era?', March 2026, p.4.

¹³ World Meteorological Organization, 'State of the Global Climate 2025', (WMO 2026).

¹⁴ DEFRA, 'Global biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and national security: A national security assessment', HM Government, 20 Jan 2026.

Investment Plan, investing in anti-drone technology and creative start-up firms, unambiguously strengthening the UK-EU Defence relationship, and so on.

- In this area, innovative approaches to procurement modelled on Ukraine's dynamic civilian and private sector adaptation to supply weapons systems that are effective in contemporary warfare need to be replicated by the UK. Likewise, engagement with other partners, including Japan, South Korea and G20 countries, should be moving faster.
- The UK should also aim to hedge against its dependency on others (e.g. for AI and other capabilities) by developing its own USPs: without this kind of agency, the UK's ability to compete, prosper and afford the services that support social cohesion is under threat.
- For other participants, however, the UK needs to go further in disaggregating the concepts of defence and security: NSS2025 emphasised certain threats – in particular, the idea that the UK is close to or at war with Russia and should be ready to defend its territorial integrity. In response, it affirmed priorities articulated by defence leaders and industry partners and prioritised the development of hard capacities to manage threats. What this de-emphasised was a focus on systemic risks and preventive/de-risking approaches beyond defence. For example, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was an effective approach to preventatively handling the threat from Iran; by contrast, the current war is failing to manage the same risk, at great cost. Regarding the systemic risks posed by pandemic diseases or AMOC collapse, defunding Official Development Assistance (ODA) and climate responses undermines UK capacities for prevention, mitigation and response. In this view, the UK needs to restore an approach to national security that looks well beyond military vulnerabilities and capabilities and that better balances investments in managing both immediate and systemic risks.
- Investments to prepare for territorial warfare may also prove an inadequate response to the threat from oligarchic authoritarianism (in which military force is only one part of a wider strategy of sowing disorder and spreading oligarchic authoritarianism). This is a social and political rather than a conventional, territorial threat, to which an effective response would involve strengthening society and democracy and addressing polarisation. In this view, large scale defence investments – via a badly performing defence procurement system, to sustain high-cost but arguably outdated platforms – could be hollowing out the UK's defences in other areas where investment and creative solutions are most needed. Meanwhile, the reputation, influence and cultural reach delivered via institutions such as the BBC, UK universities and the provision of high-quality development assistance would have been reinforced as central to the UK's resilience rather than being undermined.
- For some in the room, the UK was itself contributing to the problems it now identifies, through undermining international law and the rules-based international order, for example, in terms of its support for Israel. Through this prism, a significant departure from NSS2025 and current UK security practice warrants consideration; likewise problems of economic insecurity and polarisation could be tackled by the UK reducing its global military footprint and power projection, and reducing defence spending and related industrial subsidies in order to invest these resources into health and education.
- The erosion of respect for international law enables the rise of oligarchic authoritarianism, enables aggression and atrocities, and thus feeds the 'radical uncertainty' that the UK and many other states are struggling to deal with. To overcome this, the UK needs to reaffirm its commitment to an international legal order and work with the majority of countries who share a strategic interest in restoring respect for international law.
- Moldova and the Balkans are examples of immediate instability challenges whose management requires the use of leverage, diplomatic creativity and development investment – as well as

appropriate peace and stabilisation engagement. Cuts to such engagement under NSS2025 appear short-sighted.

- Although NSS2025 foresaw volatility, exponential AI advancement and crises (Greenland, Iran, Venezuela) still generate shocks. Greater use of gaming to grow preparedness and muscle memory could help the UK improve its ability to anticipate plausible developments, test response options and prepare to manage crises more effectively.
- Public engagement needs to be improved, so that the public is not prompted to consider national security priorities only when exposed to price shocks and cyber attacks. The public must understand and debate the various threats, opportunities, response options and trade-offs more routinely and with access to both reliable information and a broad spectrum of opinion.
- It will be hard to address this challenge, in support of adequate social cohesion and national unity around smart security policy options, without working on ‘epistemic security’. Social media and algorithms are increasingly recognised as a main source of British news, and much news content is provided by unregulated media channels.¹⁵ In this ‘post-truth’ context, disinformation regarding climate, fossil fuels and the green transition is muddying public consensus around net zero as the only way to avert systemic risks from climate change, ecosystem collapse and severe food insecurity.¹⁶
- Responding well to this challenge begins with candour and clarity from Government on threats and required responses – whether regarding Russia or climate change and net zero. Whatever their perspective, politicians, officials, think tanks, scholars, journalists, civil society and practitioner organisations all have important roles in generating this broader, better public debate on national security policy.

Session 2: Defence investments, sovereign capabilities and supply chains

Background analysis

UK defence spending was 2.6% of GDP in 2009, but had fallen to 1.9% by 2019.¹⁷ In 2025, the Government committed to restoring defence spending to 2.6% of GDP by 2027.¹⁸ In NSS2025, the hardening of the UK’s approach was backed by a commitment to spend 3.5% of GDP on defence (and 5% on broader national security) by 2035 – and to make a sustained investment in the war-fighting readiness of the armed forces – to achieve long-term deterrence. Investments aimed to boost UK defence production with a focus on nuclear warheads, munitions and energetics as well as technological advances in AI, cyber security and quantum computing.

Specific investments announced in the 2025 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) by then Defence Secretary John Healey included:

- £15 billion for the sovereign warhead programme by 2029.
- Up to £1 billion for homeland air and missile defence.
- £6 billion for munitions in the current parliament with at least six new British energetics and munitions factories.
- Investments in BAE and Rolls Royce to enable a nuclear-powered submarine to be built every 18 months from 2038.

¹⁵ See Reuters, ‘UK considers forcing social media firms to prioritise trusted news’, 22 Jun 2026.

¹⁶ See W Vowell, ‘British media ‘divorcing’ net zero from climate change – analysis’, Energy and Climate intelligence Unit, 22 Dec 2025.

¹⁷ World Bank Group, ‘Military expenditure (% of GDP) - United Kingdom’, accessed 28 April 2026.

¹⁸ E Kirk-Wade, ‘UK Defence Spending’, House of Commons Library, 9 Oct 2025.

- Production of up to 7,000 new long-range weapons in the UK.
- £1 billion for a Digital Targeting Web to be delivered in 2027.
- Creation of 'UK Defence Innovation', including £400 million to grow and support UK companies.
- £7 billion to improve military accommodation.¹⁹

Some significant production contracts have since been announced, such as the £316 million contract awarded to MBDA to deliver DragonFire laser systems to the navy.²⁰ However, the pace of government defence investment has become headline news. Following delays in publication of the Government's Defence Investment Plan, SDR co-authors have denounced 'corrosive complacency today in Britain's political leadership'.²¹ Citing the UK's 'inability to deploy more than one Royal Navy warship to the Mediterranean within the first fortnight of the Iran war', as well as 'crises in logistics, engineering, cyber, ammunition, training and medical resources', former NATO Secretary-General Lord Robertson called the UK 'underprepared... underinsured... under attack'.²² With the spending dispute unresolved, in the month after the roundtable, Defence Secretary John Healey tendered his resignation.

While the NSS2025's defence commitments have raised a range of strategic concerns, unpacked more fully below, delays have been attributed to the Treasury's hesitancy over funding defence investments. For the treasury, the 'black hole' of unaffordable demands, and the MOD's wasteful track record in procurement and contract management, reportedly loom large.²³ For others, changes in the nature of war, and the threats facing the UK, make acquiring the right equipment sufficiently quickly and affordably challenging.²⁴ Question marks also loom over the Defence Nuclear Enterprise and the AUKUS programme, given their very significant cost (probably at least 25% of the defence budget for the next decade),²⁵ technological challenges, and reliance on US inputs and cooperation.

Defence investment may be as much a supply-chain problem as a spending problem. Higher budgets will not automatically translate into readiness if the UK lacks access to critical inputs, production capacity, skilled labour, secure logistics, and reliable industrial partners. The Government's 2025 Defence Industrial Strategy responds by stressing resilience, including commitments to strengthen munitions production, maintain an 'always on' pipeline, and support the capacity to scale in crisis.²⁶ Nevertheless, capability gaps may persist if industrial capacity cannot be sufficiently increased when needed.²⁷ Addressing this concern could necessitate earlier investment in suppliers, stockpiles, repair capacity, workforce skills, and procurement relationships that can absorb shock rather than collapse under it.

Session 2 therefore asked:

¹⁹ Ministry of Defence, 'The Strategic Defence Review 2025 - Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad', (HM Government, updated 8 July 2025); C Mills, L Brooke-Holland: 'Strategic Defence Review 2025: key points and paper series', House of Commons Library Research Briefing, 24 November 2025.

²⁰ MoD, L Pollard MP, 'Boost for Armed Forces as new laser weapon takes down high-speed drones', HM Government Press Release, 20 Nov 2025.

²¹ L Fisher, 'Starmer accused of 'corrosive complacency' on UK defence by former Nato chief', *Financial Times*, 14 Apr 2026; D Boffey, 'Bizarre' lack of urgency in putting UK on war footing, says defence review co-author', *Guardian*, 14 Apr 2026.

²² Idem.

²³ S Swinford, L Brown, 'Keir Starmer delays defence investment plan over cabinet split', *The Times*, 15 Apr 2026. 'Is Keir Starmer 'complacent on defence?' – podcast', *Politics Weekly UK, The Guardian*, 16 Apr 2026.

²⁴ D Haynes, 'Multimillion-pound push to transform 'broken' UK military is a 'fiasco'', Sky News, 10 Apr 2026.

²⁵ UK Parliament Public Accounts Committee, 'Drift at the MoD: Defence plan delays undermine UK credibility with allies and industry', 7 June 2026.

²⁶ Ministry of Defence, 'Defence Industrial Strategy: Making Defence an Engine for Growth', (HM Government, 2025).

²⁷ An argument made in the SDR, the Defence Industrial Strategy and in UK Parliament Defence Committee, 'Defence Committee: "questions raised about UK's fundamental ability to defend itself"', 19 Nov 2025.

- Q1. What is the status of the planned defence investments and reforms envisaged in NSS2025, the SDR and the forthcoming Defence Investment Plan?
- Q2. Is the ambition to grow sovereign capabilities and resilience to supply chain shocks going as planned, and what relevant challenges are emerging?
- Q3. How might identified challenges best be overcome?

Key ideas discussed

- Participants from defence backgrounds at the roundtable supported the view that the lens of future national security reviews should be widened well beyond defence in future exercises. If resilience is the aim, it is important that investments in defensive resilience do not undermine social resilience, human security, climate related aspects of resilience, the capacity to produce vaccines, and so on.
- Some of the defence issues that could have been more fully addressed in NSS2025 include:
 - Decisions on trade-offs needed to refocus on Russia and Europe,
 - How to tackle the unaffordability and assess the strategic value of the defence nuclear enterprise,
 - The need not just to harness but also to control the risks posed by new defence technologies,
 - Whether UK subsidiaries of major tech firms can be part of UK sovereign capabilities (or what alternatives to pursue if this is not seen as desirable),
 - The leadership and process for the national conversation on defence and security announced in the SDR.
- Within the defence industry and establishment, there is frustration over government inertia despite rhetoric about being 'ready for war', and over the unmet need for rapid progress on procurement reform, departmental reform, including appointments into key roles, and the integration of companies and production capacities into the UK's defence posture. It will be hard to attract the private investment needed if public resources are not being delivered in line with policy announcements.
- Despite reported efforts by the Prime Minister to resolve the Treasury-MoD standoff, the resignations of Defence Secretary John Healey and Prime Minister Keir Starmer leave progress on SDR implementation and publication of a credible Defence Investment Plan in disarray. Some progress has been made on defence procurement reform and expanding munition production capacity. At the same time, the questions regarding affordability and accountability put forward by the Treasury are legitimate and important. Given the UK defence sector's track record of poor planning, cost overruns, delays and procurement failures (which Labour itself documented before entering office),²⁸ it seems reasonable to urge caution over the allocation of new resources until credible measures are in place to prevent recurrence of past failures; participants also recommended reforms to separate state from private sector interests, in order to ensure value for money for taxpayers and prevent profiteering from undermining outputs, public confidence and resilience.
- Rather than merely blaming the Treasury, the MoD and others should provide better answers to such questions, clearly setting out how Government will strengthen its approach to negotiating with industry. For example, the Government should demand a greater share of profits derived from publicly-funded defence research, and should scrutinise and seek to cap the level of public spending on defence that can get extracted as profit by asset management firms.
- Under this approach, the government would avoid setting the defence budget as an arbitrary percentage of GDP, and move towards an approach of scrutinising the needs and negotiating the

²⁸ Labour, 'Dossier of waste in the Ministry of Defence 2010 - 2021', (January 2022).

trade-offs, efficiencies and outputs more sharply, to arrive at a better value defence budget focused on outcomes.

- The urgency of increasing defence spending has been underlined by claiming that the UK is already at war with Russia. However, it is important to be honest and transparent about the level and nature of tensions and hostile activities occurring between the UK and Russia. These are currently concerning and multi-faceted, but do not yet amount to full-scale warfare. Honest, sober threat assessments and communications can enable a more effective approach to strategy development, budgeting, trade-offs and procurement. It is also important to avoid increasing the probability of escalation by avoiding rhetoric that appears to declare war, asserts that it is inevitable, or negates the potential for pursuing alternatives and offramps to full-scale war.
- The government should also open mindedly explore the evidence about the relative benefits for jobs and growth of defence vs other types of spending – and avoid claiming this as a strong justification for increasing defence spending without cross-checking the supporting evidence. It is important to note that requiring defence investment to benefit the domestic economy can reduce procurement efficiency and slow down UK-EU defence integration.

Whatever balance of national, systemic and human security priorities are reaffirmed by the UK's new Prime Minister, reframing the defence conversation away from spending towards the delivery of affordable, relevant capabilities would mark a decisive and strategic step forward.

Session 3: Relationships and alliances

Background analysis

While going to some lengths to reconfirm the strained alliance with the US, NSS2025 was especially foresightful in anticipating Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's vision for a post-rupture approach to collective resilience. It thus discusses working through the UK's 'lattice-work of international partnerships' – including with international financial institutions, international organisations like the United Nations, as well as a range of 'economically vibrant and technologically advanced' middle powers (from South Korea to the Gulf) – to counteract volatility and fragmentation.

At the same time, the core emphasis in NSS2025 remained on reaffirming existing alliances with NATO, the US and European allies, to 'champion... collective security on our continent and beyond'. With Russian aggression in the foreground, the stronger military capabilities envisaged in the document were focused on reinforcing these alliances.

In the year since NSS2025's publication, the geopolitical developments noted above have led many to question the wisdom of so much spending on a defence posture still heavily dependent on Trump's US. NATO itself has expanded, and European defence spending has risen, but the central uncertainty is whether the US will continue to stand fully behind the alliance's security guarantees, and on what terms.²⁹ The Iran war has underlined both the necessity of differentiating the UK's approach from that of the US, and the practical difficulty of disentangling itself. Nonetheless, the UK's dependence on the US (in Ukraine; for intelligence, nuclear and other capabilities; to maintain AUKUS; as a NATO member; and so on) means that a shift towards British strategic autonomy would inevitably take time.

Given reductions to the FCDO budget since 2021, the UK's investment in collective security via a wider range of partnerships will need to be achieved via a leaner diplomatic service – with fewer personnel but greater strategic focus. Reforms to the Foreign Office are being shaped by the restructuring plan

²⁹ See [no author], 'The Guardian view on defence spending: should the UK's security rest with Donald Trump?', *The Guardian*, 14 April 2026.

FCDO 2030, leading to a reduction of roughly 2,000 jobs, with more reductions to London-based than overseas postings.³⁰ FCDO 2030 focuses on five areas:

- Clearer strategy, concentrating resources and expertise where they can make a difference;
- Focus on outcomes, including a more secure and prosperous UK and world;
- Investing in the staff capabilities and tools needed to be effective;
- Strengthening expertise, with more diversity of thought and background and better engagement with external partners;
- Streamlining to enable staff to focus on high-impact work.³¹

At present, little information on progress and outcomes of these processes, or of efforts to strengthen efficiencies and synergies between diplomacy, development, economic engagement and defence, is in the public domain. Critics of these changes argue that the strategic rationale for the job cuts is unclear. They have raised concerns over the permanent loss of UK expertise and reputation, and are worried by the implications of aid cuts (discussed further below).³² Moreover, military strengthening may come at the expense of the integrated skillset required to bolster stability in the context of the interlinked socio-economic, political, cultural, economic and ecological pressures confronting the UK, other European states and the wider world.

Against this backdrop, Session 3 asked:

- Q1. How well is the UK succeeding in maintaining existing alliances with the US and NATO, strengthening European defences, and working with like-minded middle powers on shared interests?
- Q2. Are synergies between defence, diplomacy, development and economic cooperation functioning as they should?
- Q3. What is the evolving vision for FCDO reform?
- Q4. What structure is emerging and how responsive is this design to the range of security issues facing the UK and the relationships/alliances the UK needs to cultivate?
- Q5. How could the UK strengthen its approach?

Key ideas discussed

- The UK's reluctance to face up to the evolution in US domestic and foreign policy and its potential consequences has slowed its ability to reduce dependence on the US and step up cooperation with Europe, increasing its vulnerability. More willingness to explore unwelcome but plausible scenarios can help the UK to put in place political and strategic contingency plans at the pace required.
- As articulated recently by Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper, the UK's new approach to geoeconomics – including careful positioning to benefit from relations with the EU, US and China, strengthening economic ties to partners beyond these three blocs (including via the Trans-Pacific Partnership), pursuing a green transition away from fossil fuels, and strengthening sovereign AI capabilities – can contribute to national security, climate change mitigation and resilience.³³
- To navigate the unstable relations between the broad blocs of the US, Europe and China, the UK is increasingly engaging at the multilateral level, and working with a wide spectrum of influential states to pursue common interests. Under NSS2025, key states include allies like Canada, New Zealand and Australia, industrial and investment partners such as the Gulf States, Japan and

³⁰ J Sparks, 'Despondent, even mutinous' mood at UK's foreign office as government plans cuts', *Sky News*, 16 Feb 2026.

³¹ National Audit Office, 'Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office 2024-2025', (NAO, December 2025), p 15.

³² International Development Committee, 'IDC Chair responds to 'unrelenting' aid cuts', UK Parliament, 19 Mar 2026. J

Sparks, 'Despondent, even mutinous' mood at UK's foreign office as government plans cuts', *Sky News*, 16 Feb 2026.

³³ Y Cooper MP, FCDO, 'How to think about foreign policy in the new geoeconomic era', 24 Apr 2026.

South Korea, and friendly non-allies like Brazil, Indonesia and India. A clear sense emerged that the UK needs to invest energy in both multilateral global governance structures and coalitions on issues of shared interest; however, trade-offs will inevitably need to be made between partners and priorities, especially when values do not always align.

- The UK has recently made progress in its partnerships (particularly with Turkey and Indonesia), but getting maximum results from such engagement requires investment in diplomatic training and presence, as well as the determination to maximise UK influence, consistent leadership, vision, being clear on where the UK can make a compelling offer (e.g. its technical expertise) and success in prioritisation.
- In terms of prioritisation, the FCDO could streamline by doing and requiring less reporting, which can undermine projects' efficiency, moving towards fewer, bigger projects with multi-year rather than single-year budgets, and only developing diplomatic agreements/MoUs where there is determination to follow up (rather than for show).
- Amid aid cuts and defence spending increases, the UK needs to recall that addressing stability challenges in Europe's Southern neighbourhood requires significant investment in diplomatic and developmental approaches to promote security, governance and development outcomes, rather than hard military capacity-building partnerships.
- In this sense participants echoed the concern raised by parliamentarians, NGOs and civil service unions that FCDO restructuring has removed expert capacity, resources and prioritisation from conflict prevention and peacebuilding at an inopportune moment.³⁴ There is a risk that central conflict expertise may disappear, leaving embassies/High Commissions to improvise. Ideas for the UK championing conflict prevention and peacebuilding included helping to set up a fund with official endorsement to encourage private philanthropic donors to fund peace initiatives with greater confidence (and less concern over political risks).
- The UK needs to shore up its presence and engagement in UN processes – which it is perceived to have deprioritised in comparison with NATO.
- Greater clarity and urgency from leaders on cross-government missions is needed to unlock greater cooperation and synergy between the FCDO and other parts of government in favour of a genuinely holistic approach to promoting peace, security and resilience.

Overall, given the need for the UK to maintain an ambitious approach to diplomacy, development and international partnerships to prevent and manage crises and maintain resilience in the face of systemic risks, the roundtable articulated the need to think again about the capabilities and resource levels needed to deliver on these imperatives – within and beyond the FCDO.

Session 4: Resilience to future threats – towards the next NSS?

Background analysis

Alongside the emphasis on defence, NSS2025 touches on broader security issues, such as the climate and nature crisis, economic well-being, food prices, supply chains, migration/border control, and safety on the streets and online. It acknowledges the importance of energy security, green transition, and upstream interventions to counter threats before they reach the UK, though such issues are de-emphasised compared to past UK strategies.

³⁴ See International Development Committee, 'The FCDO's Approach to Displaced People', (House of Commons, 2025), pp 13-14; E Courea, 'Fears for UK security as Foreign Office moves to scrap unit on conflict and refugee crises', *The Guardian*, 30 Nov 2025; BOND, 'Bond warns of impact of FCDO staffing cuts on UK aid', 1 Dec 2025; J Dunton, 'Union questions PM's comments on impact of FCDO restructure', *Civil Service World*, 30 Apr 2026.

After the ‘temporary’ cut from 0.7% to 0.5% of GNI in 2020, the UK announced in 2025 a further cut in ODA to 0.3% of Gross National Income by 2027,³⁵ with the intention to focus remaining resources on fragile and conflict affected states, humanitarian support, tackling violence against women and girls and global health threats.³⁶ It is also pursuing four ‘essential shifts’ in its development approach – from donor to investor, from service delivery to systems support, from providing grants to expertise, and from prioritising international intervention to local leadership.³⁷

Critics have questioned the intention to deliver a better development impact with fewer resources and have warned about the destabilising impacts of aid cuts.³⁸ Peace and aid organisations – while welcoming continued focus on conflict and fragility – have questioned the prospects for success amid significant reductions in country budgets in unstable regions, and significant defence spending increases.³⁹

Despite the reductions in ODA, the UK also plans to ‘remain at the forefront of international action on climate change and nature loss’.⁴⁰ However, in March 2026, the Government announced that UK international climate finance would fall to around £6 billion over three years, prompting criticism that climate support for developing countries was being reduced at precisely the moment when climate risk is being officially acknowledged as a critical national security challenge.⁴¹ Other experts question the ecological implications of increasing British defence and nuclear spending,⁴² the wisdom of cutting diplomacy, peacebuilding and development to fund the military,⁴³ and the risk that a more defence-led security agenda could crowd out the preventive and resilience-building work that the NSS also suggests is required.⁴⁴ In NSS 2025, stronger security capabilities were also intended to strengthen the UK’s borders and contribute to jobs and economic growth at home. However, OECD analysis casts doubt on the ability of defence investment to deliver as much growth as investments in other areas.⁴⁵

NSS2025 asserts that a new national resilience effort requires building public support, raising public awareness of threats, and establishing a new social contract to underpin the UK’s changing national security approach, perhaps via the public conversation about whole-of-society defence envisaged in the 2025 Strategic Defence Review.

³⁵ Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, HM Treasury and Baroness Chapman of Darlington, ‘Future International Development Spending set out in Spring Statement’, 27 March 2025

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/future-international-development-spending-set-out-in-spring-statement>; ; see also P Loft, P Brien, ‘UK aid: spending reductions since 2020 and outlook from 2024/25’, (House of Commons Library, 12 Feb 2025), <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9224/CBP-9224.pdf>

³⁶ FCDO, Y Cooper et al, ‘Foreign Secretary sets out new innovative development reforms’

³⁷ International Development Committee, ‘UK Aid and Development Assistance in a Fracturing World: Strengthening Resilience and Cooperation’, UK Parliament, 28 Apr 2026.

³⁸ International Development Committee, ‘IDC Chair responds to ‘unrelenting’ aid cuts’, UK Parliament, 19 Mar 2026. J

Sparks, ‘Despondent, even mutinous’ mood at UK’s foreign office as government plans cuts’, *Sky News*, 16 Feb 2026.

³⁹ BOND, ‘Joint statement from Peacebuilding and International Development Organisations on UK Aid Reforms’, 20 Mar 2026.

⁴⁰ FCDO, Y Cooper et al, ‘Foreign Secretary sets out new innovative development reforms’

⁴¹ F Harvey, J Elgot, ‘UK to cut climate aid to developing countries by 14% to £2bn a year in ‘refocus’’, *The Guardian*, 19 Mar 2026.

⁴² E Kinney, ‘Fossil fuel transition talks must address militaries’, CEOBS, 20 Apr 2026. Envirotec, ‘Nature groups reveal flaws underpinning government’s nuclear review, and warn of potential for catastrophe’, January 2026; the National Audit Office report ‘Decommissioning Sellafield: managing risks from the nuclear legacy’ (NAO, 23 Oct 2024) makes for grim reading on the challenges of managing Britain’s nuclear risks and costs.

⁴³ A Culbertson, ‘Slashing foreign aid will lead to unrest, crises and threaten UK security, MPs warn government’, *Sky*, 29 October 2025; EO Wright, ‘UK facing global insecurity with ‘one hand tied behind its back’, *The Times*, 16 Jun 2025.

⁴⁴ L Attree, ‘Strategising for peace in the New Age of Empire’, *Rethinking Security*, 11 Dec 2025.

⁴⁵ ‘Recent analyses of the possible economic impact of higher military expenditure in Europe have produced estimates ranging from a 0.5 to 1.5% boost to Europe-wide GDP for defence spending increases of 1.5% of GDP’ OECD. ‘OECD Economic Outlook’, Volume 2025 Issue 1. OECD, p. 48)

Still, findings of a newly published Open University report suggest this could be a challenging conversation: the public has concerns not only about traditional security threats such as hostile states, but also about a wider range of human security concerns. Many of the public do not necessarily see the government as a source of greater security; those with different voting intentions have sharply contrasting perceptions regarding the relevant threats and appropriate policy responses; and while the public support uplifting defence spending in principle, they do not support increasing taxes, higher borrowing, or cutting spending elsewhere to pay for it. One pertinent division relates to migration and border control – the biggest concern for those intending to vote Conservative and Reform, but not among the top three concerns of people intending to vote Liberal Democrat, Green, or Labour.⁴⁶

Questions for Session 4 were thus:

- Q1. How well is the UK balancing hard security responses with actions on broader priorities acknowledged in NSS2025 and other policy documents (such as upstream prevention efforts, climate and energy security, health and socio-economic well-being)?
- Q2. How is the effort to maintain domestic social cohesion and grow public awareness and buy-in to the NSS2025 vision faring?
- Q3. How might these broader priorities and public views on security best be factored into future UK strategy?

Key ideas discussed

- The extent of cuts to FCDO staff, NGO conflict prevention and peacebuilding programmes, the UK Integrated Security Fund (ISF) and institutions such as the British Council is problematic. Even if more defence investment to reverse the hollowing out of capabilities for deterrence and self-defence were, on balance, seen as warranted, stronger objectives and investment in the area of conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding, and the maintenance of FCDO expertise and other instruments of UK soft power, would remain necessary and cost effective.
- Cuts in funds to climate action and adaptation⁴⁷ are short-sighted, especially in light of the Government's own dire assessments regarding risks to global ecosystems, and the fact that climate change is already feeding into poor harvests and food inflation in the UK.⁴⁸ The UK should return to the practice of including a risk matrix in its national security strategy documents to ensure that systemic risks are duly identified and appropriately resourced. The Government also needs to be bolder in taking climate action – for example, having helped Brazil to develop the Tropical Forests Forever Facility for rainforest conservation, critics have seen its refusal to invest in it as short-sighted.⁴⁹ Geopolitical crises and energy supply challenges make the transition to green electricity a national security priority.⁵⁰
- Participants were very concerned about deepening divides in the UK and the implications for UK democracy and security of the loss of social cohesion. Efforts to sow division from Russia and the US – promoting climate denial, anti-migrant sentiment and far-right extremism – make it difficult to tackle this problem. The result is 'epistemic insecurity' – whereby the public cannot form a clear understanding about pressing risks and solutions required. Much more initiative needs to be taken in this area: to build a more informed public conversation on national security (featuring genuine consultation rather than only top-down awareness-raising); to work structurally to curb

⁴⁶ T Martin, 'Public Opinion & National Security in the UK: A People-Centred Approach' (Open University, April 2026).

⁴⁷ See Harvey, Elgot op cit.

⁴⁸ H Horton, 'One year's worth of bread lost in UK to wrecked harvests since 2020, report finds', *The Guardian*, 8 Oct 2025; The Food Foundation, 'Researchers to tackle 'climateflation' impacts on food prices', 22 Jan 2025.

⁴⁹ See F Harvey, 'UK opts out of flagship fund to protect Amazon and other threatened tropical forests', *The Guardian*, Nov 2025.

⁵⁰ D Jalili, H Briffa, M Ryan, *Convergence: Climate Change and Geopolitical Futures*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2026).

misinformation; to address the university funding crisis and restore trust in evidence-based expertise; and to cultivate a less toxic media environment.

- UK national security strategy development processes could do more to take the plurality and breadth of public opinion on national security into account – which includes significant public appetite for peace, development and climate engagement, and concern not only on issues such as migration but also about government security policies and approaches (not least in relation to Gaza), policing, the US and the Trump administration and nuclear weapons. The Government’s approach – omitting public consultation, and emphasising some risks while downplaying others – risks detracting from the candid and facts-based debate needed, and ignores how polarised the public debate is becoming. The lack of cohesion is likely to undermine solidarity and coherent long-term strategy development and implementation in the face of security threats of all kinds.
- Diverse and polarised views illustrate that the Government needs to work hard to regain public trust on national security, via a narrative and conversation that hears and addresses the full range of views, is not overly deferential to perspectives amplified by right-leaning media, and which thus combines responsiveness with due care to justify well-evidenced priorities and readiness to challenge misperceptions and misinformation.

Conclusion and next steps

NSS2025 correctly identified a volatile landscape – and called for a rapid strengthening of UK defences and resilience in response. If instability has met expectations, debates are ongoing over how well the strategy and its implementation are meeting the challenges of the moment. A less reliable and more transactional US, continued war in Ukraine, escalation in the Middle East, climate disruption, socio-political polarisation, and fiscal pressure all widen the gap between strategic ambition and usable capacity.

Looking ahead, the central question is how to build and balance both credible deterrence and the wider foundations of security: diplomacy, development, public resilience, ecological stability, and social trust. In response, the summary of this outcome document captures seven core ideas and recommendations advanced during the roundtable.

1. **US unpredictability requires** stronger UK contingency planning, including progress toward sovereign decoupling, closer UK–EU defence cooperation, and faster reform of the UK defence sector.
2. **Defence reform should revolve around capability and outcomes rather than spending levels**, with emphasis on defining priorities relevant to future challenges (including resilience against drones and hybrid threats), procurement reform, innovation, accountability, and cost-effectiveness.
3. **The UK should reduce strategic dependencies where possible** and develop distinctive technological strengths that enhance partnerships and influence.
4. **National security requires a broader threat assessment**, and greater weighting towards four high-priority systemic risks in response:
 - a. **Oligarchic authoritarianism**, fuelled by both Russia and the US, demands greater attention to domestic cohesion, well-being, equality and resilience.
 - b. **Climate change and ecosystem collapse** requires stronger climate action, protection of food security, action against climate disinformation, and greater international cooperation.
 - c. **Conflict and instability** warrants increased investment in diplomacy, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and stabilisation efforts.

- d. **Health security** needs to be safeguarded with emphasis on national and global mechanisms to prevent, detect, and respond to biological threats.
5. **International cooperation is essential**, with both traditional allies and emerging powers, through stronger diplomacy, clear priorities, and consistent support for international law.
6. **Public engagement on national security must improve**, enabling informed debate about threats, trade-offs, and policy choices while rebuilding public trust.
7. **Epistemic security is a critical challenge**, as disinformation and unregulated digital media undermine public understanding, democratic consensus, and support for evidence-based policies. To address it, the Government should communicate threats and responses more clearly, counter disinformation, strengthen the education sector (including addressing the universities funding crisis), and regulate harmful information environments while carefully safeguarding fundamental freedoms.

Rethinking Security, the Centre for Defence Studies at King's College London and BISA's Security Policy and Practice working group members will continue to explore these issues and offer evidence and insights on them going forward.